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ABSTRACT

Ten areas of change, or megatrends, are transforming the practice of public relations. First is the change from manipulation to effective adaptation to environmental demands, constraints, and opportunities. Second, the role of the public relations practitioner is changing from external counselor to internal team member and leader. Third is the evolution of the public relations practitioner from an information impediment to an information facilitator or boundary spanner. The fourth change is from marketing to management; public relations' prime responsibility has become providing the information and environment in which management can function most effectively. Fifth is the change from program success, or a focus on discrete tasks or products, to continuous process; sixth is the change in the public relations practitioner's role from being a craftsperson to being a manager; and seventh is the change from concentration on placement of positive items in the media toward issues management. Eighth is the change in emphasis from output to input, with focus now directed to messages to and from internal publics. While the ninth change is among the most fully established megatrends affecting public relations: the evolution from "fire fighters to fire preventors." Preventive public relations is now the widely held ideal among practitioners. All of these trends have helped to create the tenth megatrend--the move toward legitimacy. Public relations is now being recognized as a legitimate field of study. (HOD)

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MEGATRENDS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS:

SOME PROPOSED RESPONSES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION

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Megatrends in Public Relations: Some Proposed Responses for PR Education

In his recently published book, Megatrends (Warner Books, 1982), John Naisbitt identifies what he terms "ten new directions transforming our lives." He carefully points out that trends only tell us the direction in which things are moving. The decisions about what to do in response to these trends are up to us. Our purpose here is both to identify some major directions in the practice of public relations and suggest some responses appropriate for public relations education.

Our task and ambition is slightly smaller than Naisbitt's. Instead of society, we look at a particular profession. Still, his framework fits our efforts so perfectly that we have chosen to adopt his term. Like him, we identify ten areas of change which are transforming the practice of public relations. We gleaned them not from any specific sources, but from our recent experience in writing a comprehensive public relations text. We also hope to make some meaningful suggestions concerning the demands on public relations education made by changes. Academic efforts in all fields notoriously lag rather than lead the real world. We seek to make it more likely that we are arming our students to fight the next war rather than the last one.

A list connotes some order. The megatrends which we now present have no linear order, however, because they are observations of an organic, synergistic whole. Consequently, they interact and overlap. In no case are we talking about circumstances as they are. In our progression from the past to the future, we are forever in transit. Still, each trend describes where public relations has been and where we believe it is going (Table 1).

TABLE 1

MAGATRENDS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

	FROM	TO
1.	Manipulation	Adaptation
2.	External Counselor	Internal Team Member
3.	Barrier	Boundary Spanner
4.	Marketing	Management
5.	Program	Process
6.	Craftsperson	Manager
7.	Items	Issues
8.	Output	Input
9.	Fire Fighter	Fire Preventer
10.	Illegitimacy	Legitimacy

From Manipulation to Adaptation

We begin with the consideration of this megatrend because it encompasses the entire past century of public relations evolution, and because changes in this area are prerequisites for the development of other trends we will discuss. Public relations was born as a manipulative art. Its intent was to achieve specific results in terms of customer response, election outcomes, media coverage, or public attitudes. The job of public relations was to communicate in such ways as to assure the compliance of relevant publics behavior and attitudes to an individual's or organization's plans. The means, methods, and media of communication were determined by what it took to get the job done and little else. Stunts, sensationalism, and embellished and highly selective truth were hallmarks of the trade.

The historically blatant manipulative aims of public relations aroused the hostility of press and public toward the practice experienced to this day. Moreover, in a more subtle and serious way, it caused those who used public relations practitioners and their manipulative skills consciously to limit their internal influence. Until public relations practitioners moved beyond manipulation, their practice was restricted to specific tasks. They were the errand boys (and sometimes prostitutes) they were alleged to be by their journalistic colleagues. The manipulative phase became history as practitioners began to establish trust and credibility. Only then could public relations begin to make gains in stature and responsibility within organizations.

As the 20th century progressed, it became increasingly obvious that successful organizations got that way and stayed that way not by seeking compliance from outside entities to their plans, but by responding and adapting effectively to environmental demands, constraints, and opportunities. Public relations practitioners found that they could greatly facilitate this adaptive process if they could become trusted, two-way communicators seeking to establish rapport and mutual understanding between groups. To the extent that we still teach our students to serve manipulative rather than adaptive organizational goals, we encourage them to live in the past, rather than in the future.

From External Counselor to Internal Team Member

The field of public relations was established as a legitimate occupation

and worthwhile field of study by a handful of ex-newspapermen and press agents in the 1920s and 1930s. These pioneers, for the most part, set up their own firms and frequently succeeded in building larger-than-life reputations for themselves as well as their clients. This external, independent counselor model of public relations practice quickly became the ideal that has been taught in our textbooks and university classrooms ever since. However, the actual practice of public relations has evolved far beyond this original model. Although counseling firms have continued to flourish, a new breed of practitioner has emerged primarily within the structures of large complex organizations. Their clients are indefinable entities with vast managerial hierarchies that seldom produce the opportunity to develop a personality like J. D. Rockefeller. They must be concerned with internal communication as well as external publicity and provide managerial leadership as well as communication expertise. They are essential members of the management team. Moreover, these new organizational practitioners are achieving, through their anonymous managerial accomplishments, the kind of influence that the pioneers only dreamed about.

Unfortunately the university classroom, where new ideas are supposed to flourish, has been among the last to recognize this dramatic megatrend in the practice of public relations. Although we give lip service to organizational PR, we continue to teach a model of public relations practice that is largely based upon the activities of counseling firms. This is, in part, due to our reverence for the great pioneers of the past and the larger than life profiles of many successful counselors of today.

The prospect presented by our unwillingness to accept the prominent role of organizational public relations is that universities will be graduating, in

unprecendented numbers, public relations students who will be unqualified for the jobs that await them. They will be unqualified, not because they lack the communication skills necessary to do the job, but because they lack an understanding of how to apply their skills in organizational settings. A survey of 1980 PRSSA graduates reported budgeting and general business practice as the two areas in which they felt least prepared for their new jobs. The Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education summed up this problem in their 1981 survey report: "Although public relations students today are graduating with strong backgrounds in the social and behavioral sciences, they still appear to be weak in business."

Public relations specialists in organizations must be capable of understanding the concerns and attitudes of customers, employees, investors, managers, special interest groups and a vast array of other publics. But the job cannot stop with an understanding of these complex issues; public relations practitioners must be able to integrate this information into the organization's managerial decision making process. The point is not that we should be substituting business courses for our communication curriculum. Public relations graduates must continue to exhibit high quality communication skills to do the jobs for which they are hired. However, in addition to communication skills, those of us who teach public relations must give our students an appreciation for their role as managers in affecting the actions of an organization and the importance of public relations input into that process. Otherwise, we doom our graduates to operative level positions in dead-end career paths.

From Barrier to Boundary Spanner

Public relations practitioners often have been accused of bottling up or covering up important information by keeping the media and other parties from

reaching those people within organizations they really ought to see. Thus, practitioners are characterized as gatekeepers at best and barriers at worst: someone who impedes or selectively transmits the flow of information.

Our third megatrend is the evolution in role from information impediment to information facilitator or boundary spanner.

The term boundary spanner is commonly used in managerial literature to refer to any position that links an organization with its environment. In this crucial role, public relations practitioners assess the behavior of their organization in relation to its environment, assess the state of the environment to provide direction for the organization, and help to provide the means by which organizations adapt to meet public expectations. To prepare our students to meet the challenges of this boundary spanning role, our curriculum must stress the skills required in that role. The skills necessary to acquire, synthesize and present information to internal management audiences are crucial in this regard. As one practitioner put it recently, "Early in his career every public relations practitioner finds to his surprise--and often distress--that he must communicate with those key centers of influence and power within his own organization." Rather than being surprised and distressed at the prospect of this kind of communication, our students should be eagerly prepared for the new opportunities that will be available to those who can meet these needs.

From Marketing to Management

It was not very long ago that the primary justification for public relations was considered to be the effort to sell products. Public relations was seen as an adjunct to the sales effort, concerned primarily with product publicity and

with the objective of getting "free advertising."

The megatrend which has seen public relations move from a marketing adjunct to the management mainstream is a function of the changes in both marketing and management. The development of the marketing concept which stresses organizational responsiveness to markets, rather than "sales efforts," has changed the direction of information flow related to the development and sale of products. Management's task has also changed dramatically. Once, the job of management was to keep an established production organization smoothly functioning. Now, management seeks constantly to adapt a flexible organism to dynamic and complex environments.

Naturally, public relations has changed in conjunction with these changes in marketing and management. While still contributing to the marketing effort, public relation's prime responsibility has become the effort to provide the information and environment in which management can function most effectively. Unfortunately, our teaching still too often seems based on the notion that the amount of time and space a practitioner can get in the media (free advertising) is the ultimate measure of success.

From Program to Process

Traditionally, public relations education has placed tremendous emphasis on programs and products, specific tangible outputs of public relations efforts. The job of the public relations practitioner, as seemingly conceptualized in training for the field, consists of a progression of discrete tasks -- media releases, publications, public service announcements, publicity campaigns, and the like.

These and many other products and programs remain the time-consuming responsibility of public relations departments. However, one of the clearest observable megatrends in public relations, as it is practiced within organizations (where most of it is practiced), is that organizational communication is moving toward being viewed as a continuous process, not just as a succession of programs.

While public relations educators will not be relieved of responsibilities related to the student's ability to develop and deliver specific products and programs, they must more heavily emphasize other areas as well. Stress must be given to the development of overall communication objectives consistent with organizational objectives, the practitioner's counseling role with management, the ability to work closely and cogently with managers and specialists representing other organizational functions, and the adoption of a long-term, general perspective instead of a short-term, specific perspective.

From Craftsperson to Manager

In conjunction with the traditional emphasis on producing specific products and programs, public relations has been viewed as a specific set of skills. Writing ability has always led the list, followed by speaking, interpersonal skills, and a potpourri including photography, graphic design, and the like. These skills remain important. But stressing them exclusively leaves the fledgling public relations person with the potential to become a craftsperson or technician when megatrends are creating the demand for communication managers. In order to succeed in this changed environment, public relations educators must equip their students with additional skills, priorities and objectives.

A young public relations practitioner with less than ten years of experience put it this way: "We're yearning to learn all we can about financial statements and effective management techniques. While many of us still write, edit, layout and design, we have also moved up to greater responsibilities demanding a broad knowledge of business, international affairs and the issues affecting the industries in which we work." She learned about writing, editing, layout and design in school, but not the rest. The evolution of the public relations profession demands that we as educators seriously begin to address the rest.

From Items to Issues

In times past, public relations practitioners sought to place "items" in the media and measured their effectiveness in column inches. This megatrend has carried public relations away from exclusive concentration on placing positive items, through defending against negative publicity, and toward what has been entitled "issues management."

Issues management, of course, is the identification of key issues confronting organizations, and the management of organizational responses to them. This process involves the early identification of potential controversies, development of organizational policies related to these issues, creation of programs to carry out policies, implementation of these programs, communication with appropriate publics about these policies and programs, and evaluation of the results of such efforts.

The issues-management process is an area in which public relations has its greatest potential in terms of contributions to managerial decision making. Once again, we educators must adapt to the megatrend. Organizations understand

that they can avoid negative publicity and gain positive public notice by adapting in advance to environmental demands. In this way they are able to reap the benefits of being perceived as responsible leaders. We must show that we understand by training our students to identify and deal with the issues which will confront the organizations that will employ them.

From Output to Input

As we have implied in our discussion of other megatrends, the traditional emphasis of public relations has been on output -- the creation of messages for external publics. Increasingly, however, the public relations practitioners are realizing that their most important messages constitute input -- messages to and from internal publics. Intermediate points in this megatrend line include the rising importance of employee and managerial audiences for public relations messages.

Ultimately, however, public relations enters into the very core of organizations bearing the information and perspectives which influence fundamental decisions of policy and strategy. Public relations practitioners increasingly provide inputs to and participate in such decisions. As such, our students must learn to understand the managerial perspective while maintaining an independent viewpoint which considers social as well as economic variables.

For example, managers often are faced with questions about how truthful and open they should be on a given matter. In such circumstances, the public relations practitioner, who does not think like a manager and is concerned primarily with output, typically counsels openness, honesty, and the people's right to know. Their advice often is rejected as impractical or preachy.

The practitioner who understands the managerial perspective, and who is concerned with input, seeks the same goals of openness and honesty, but takes a different approach. He or she helps management weigh the pragmatic risks of various communication strategies. By pointing out costs and benefits of the different strategies, this practitioner is more likely to provide constructive and acceptable advice, retain credibility in a decision-making role, and steer the organization toward desirable objectives of openness and honesty. This is the sort of role we should be preparing our students to assume and the sort of messages they must be able to communicate.

From Fire Fighters to Fire Preventors

Among the most fully established megatrends affecting public relations is the evolution of the field from fire fighters to fire preventors. It is now broadly recognized that effective public relations does not exist to clean up messes once they are made, but seeks to avoid such dilemmas to begin with. Preventive public relations is a widely held ideal among practitioners.

Our point is not to rehash old ideas, but rather to point out that the confluence of many of the megatrends we have been describing gives preventive public relations an opportunity to be more than an ideal. Public relations practitioners are moving into positions which now allow them more fully to recognize the areas where potential dangers lie, to be equipped to deal with these dangers, and to be in positions of sufficient power and influence to affect needed changes before potentials become realities. Once again, managerial skills take precedence over media skills; and a more appropriate balance is called for in what we emphasize in our teaching.

From Illegitimacy to Legitimacy

Continuing debates about professionalism notwithstanding, and despite the efforts of PRSA and others, public relations has always had an air of illegitimacy about it. Public relations has always been a bastard child, a waif that wasn't really wanted, even in the places that temporarily took it in. In the journalism schools, where it is most likely to be found, it often is taught as though the course is entitled "How to fall from grace." Some of the best journalism schools, Northwestern and Columbia for example, won't have a thing to do with it. While public relations has become the most popular field of study among job-oriented journalism students, journalism professors (who wish their thwarted idealism upon others) bemoan what they see as a substitution of money-seeking for seeking after truth. Similarly, as long as public relations practitioners seek their legitimacy from the working press, they will remain unfulfilled.

Public relations, however, to the extent that it is no longer a front or a manipulator of the media or the public, has rapidly gained legitimacy in the eyes of organizational managers and executives. It has gained legitimacy in business schools where it is often taught under the title of "public affairs," "organizational communication," or even "business and society."

The megatrend of legitimacy has developed because of all the other trends we have described. Members of the profession who help organizations adapt and be responsive to the demands and opportunities present in society, who provide working linkages between organizations, and who play a critical role in the effective management of our crucial problem-solving organization systems are not only legitimate, but deserving of honor and esteem.

This megatrend has begun, but it is a long way from fruition. We educators can help it on its way be preparing students for the future, or we can hinder it by sharing with them only our own pasts. If we do the latter, we will ultimately give up our educational role to others in business schools and law schools who more ably play it, even though they play it under other names.